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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 31 of General Assembly resolution 54/189 A of 17 December 1999, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report every three months during its fifty-fourth session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan (UNSMA). The present report, which covers developments since the issuance of my annual report on 16 November 1999 (A/54/536-S/1999/1145) until 6 March 2000, is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan, including those in the humanitarian and human rights fields.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

A. Activities of my Personal Representative and of the Special Mission

2. On 12 January 2000, I informed the Security Council and the General Assembly of my intention to appoint Francesc Vendrell as my Personal Representative and Head of UNSMA. Immediately following his appointment, which became effective on 1 February, my Personal Representative embarked on his first visit to Afghanistan as well as to several countries in the region and beyond, including members of the "six plus two" group.

3. From 3 to 23 February, Mr. Vendrell visited Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Uzbekistan and the Russian Federation, having already visited Washington, D.C., prior to his departure. In Kabul, he held meetings with Mullah Mohammad Rabbani, Chairman of the Taliban Council of Ministers, and Maulawi Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil, the Taliban Foreign Minister. In Dushanbe, he held discussions with Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, President of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, and Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, and was received by Emomali Rakhmonov, the President of Tajikistan. In Dushanbe, Islamabad, Tehran, Tashkent and Moscow, he had meetings with the Foreign Ministers and other senior authorities of the respective Governments.

4. The purpose of my Personal Representative's visit was to familiarize himself with Afghanistan and the countries in the region and to listen to the views of the Afghan parties as well as of the Governments of the "six plus two" group. The two Afghan parties stated their readiness to cooperate with him in the search for a political solution to the Afghan conflict. Both expressed their opposition to terrorism as well as their commitment to progressively eradicate drug cultivation. They also stated their respective positions with regard to the establishment of a broadly based, multi-ethnic and representative government. The Taliban authorities proposed that such a government be answerable to the Emir-ul-Momineen and that the opposition accept the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan as the form of government. This condition, however, is clearly unacceptable to the United Front, which favours a political solution based on the establishment of a provisional government composed of all the factions and representative of the main ethnic groups until such time, hopefully in two years, as a loya jirgah, or grand assembly, could be convened or elections organized.

5. While the Taliban authorities said they were not opposed in principle to eventual elections or to a loya jirgah, they mentioned two other "alternatives" for ending the conflict, namely the surrender of the opposition or a military victory. On the issue of a ceasefire, my Personal Representative formed the impression that neither side ruled out a new offensive in the spring or summer, the Taliban because it had not given up hopes of a military victory and the United Front because it might aim at regaining the territory it had lost to the Taliban.

6. Regarding the Security Council demand that the Taliban turn over Usama bin Laden without delay, Mullah Rabbani reminded my Personal Representative that Mr. bin Laden had taken up residence when Afghanistan was under the control of the previous regime. He also maintained that there was not sufficient evidence linking him to terrorist bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam and that, at any rate, Mr. bin Laden was no longer able to carry out activities from Afghan territory.

7. The Governments of the "six plus two" group visited by Mr. Vendrell expressed concern at the absence of a political solution to the Afghan conflict and at the likelihood of renewed fighting after the winter snows had melted. They shared the view that international terrorism, illicit drug production and trafficking and extremism emanating from Afghanistan posed a serious threat to the stability of the region. They all reaffirmed their commitment to work with the United Nations, which they considered should continue to play the central

role in international efforts to achieve a peaceful and lasting settlement to the Afghan crisis. Many of them strongly criticized the Taliban for its apparent determination to seek a military solution, which, those Governments asserted, was an unachievable and unacceptable option.

8. These Governments conveyed their interest in strengthening the role of the "six plus two" group as a means of bringing the parties to the negotiating table and assisting in the search for a lasting political settlement. In this connection, the meeting of the group held on 28 February, focusing on the issue of illicit drugs (see below), is a reflection of this renewed commitment and, hopefully, a harbinger of closer cooperation among its members.

9. Following the acceptance by the Taliban authorities of the deployment of the UNSMA Civil Affairs Unit, four civil affairs officers have arrived and have been assigned to Kabul, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-e Sharif. The political component of UNSMA will be increased to its full capacity by the end of June, by which time the new Tehran office should have been opened. It is also envisaged that by then the Mission's presence in Kabul will have been enlarged.

B. Other political developments

10. During the reporting period a series of diplomatic contacts took place regarding Afghanistan. These include a visit to Tehran in early December by Pakistan's Chief Executive, General Pervez Musharraf, official visits to Islamabad in late January by Taliban "Foreign Minister" Wakil Ahmed Mutawakil and Taliban "Council of Ministers" Chairman Mullah Rabbani, and a visit to Pakistan in the third week of January by the United States Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Karl Inderfurth, during which he met with Amir Khan Muttaqi, the former Taliban "Minister for Information and Culture". For his part, Professor Rabbani, the President of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, travelled to Tehran in mid-December for talks with Iranian President Mohammed Khatami and other Iranian authorities, as well as with the Afghan leaders in exile, followed by a visit to the United Arab Emirates.

11. In January an Iranian technical delegation visited areas controlled by the Taliban with the stated purpose of inspecting and assessing the damage suffered by their diplomatic facilities in the cities of Herat and Kabul. The Islamic Republic of Iran has yet to receive what it considers a satisfactory reply from the Taliban to its demand for the apprehension and extradition or punishment of those responsible for the killing of Iranian diplomats and a journalist in Mazar-e Sharif in August 1998. The Islamic Republic of Iran reopened a border post for trade with Afghanistan in the autumn of 1999.

12. President Khatami, in his capacity as Chairman of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), launched a diplomatic initiative in February. An OIC delegation, led by the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and composed of the other members of the OIC Committee for Afghanistan, toured Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Saudi Arabia. Following this mission, OIC invited the United Front and the Taliban to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for separate talks with the OIC mission with a view to convening eventual face-to-face negotiations between the two sides. My

Personal Representative represented the United Nations as an observer at these separate meetings, which took place from 7 to 9 March in Jeddah. Prior to these meetings I had met personally with the members of the delegation when they visited New York on 1 March. Although the two warring factions were unable to reach an agreement or to move closer to a political solution in Afghanistan, both sides agreed to hold another round of indirect talks after the haj season.

13. In a follow-up to former Afghan king Zahir's proposal to convene an emergency loya jirgah, a second preparatory meeting was held in Rome, from 22 to 25 November 1999, with assistance from the Government of Italy. More than 60 prominent Afghan individuals from both outside and inside Afghanistan participated in the meeting. A United Nations observer was present, as were representatives of France, Germany, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Japan, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States.

14. At the conclusion of the meeting, the group issued a statement saying that the participants in the Rome meeting had agreed that an emergency loya jirgah would be the most effective mechanism for resolving the Afghan conflict and that it should be held in Afghanistan. They decided, within six months after the Rome meeting, to send delegations to the United Nations and other international bodies and the countries concerned as well as to Afghanistan's main warring factions in order to seek their cooperation and participation in the loya jirgah.

15. At around the same time, the executive committee of the so-called Cyprus meeting convened in Tehran. The committee, consisting of 25 core members of the Cyprus meeting, discussed practical measures for achieving its ultimate goal, which is also the convening of a loya jirgah in Afghanistan. In January, the committee dispatched delegations to Kandahar and Feyzabad to inform the Taliban and the United Front of their objectives.

16. Following the failure of the Taliban authorities to comply with the Security Council's demand contained in paragraph 2 of its resolution 1267 (1999) regarding Usama bin Laden, the Council's sanctions went into effect on 14 November 1999. Flights of Afghanistan's Ariana Airlines to its only regular destination, the United Arab Emirates, were discontinued. Pakistan announced that it had closed branches of Afghan banks in its territory and frozen Taliban accounts. However, efforts to persuade the Taliban to comply with the Council's demand have so far proven unsuccessful.

17. During the reporting period, some Taliban-held areas have reportedly experienced difficulties, including incidents of looting followed by a series of explosions in Kabul in late February. On a separate occasion, the elders of the tribes of Khost in late January expelled the Taliban-appointed Governor of the province. This incident has been interpreted by political observers as a signal of dissatisfaction among the local Pashtuns with the conduct of the Kandahari Taliban.

18. The United Front has also faced problems as some of their commanders defected to the Taliban. In addition to the deaths of some of their prominent commanders, including Commander Najmuddin in Badakhshan and Abdul Charik in

Sar-e Pul, there have been reports of infighting among the United Front leadership.

19. Two hijackings of passenger airliners served to draw considerable media attention to Afghanistan. In the first such incident, involving an Indian airliner forced to land at Kandahar, United Nations staff helped provide relief to the passengers during their long ordeal as hostages. A United Nations representative was also present during the efforts leading to the resolution of the second incident, when an Afghan airliner was hijacked to London.

C. Activities in New York

20. The "six plus two" group convened a meeting on 28 February in New York at the level of Permanent Representative and above in order to discuss the issue of illicit drugs emanating from Afghanistan. The meeting, which was also attended by senior counter-narcotics experts from the capitals of the "six plus two" members, was co-chaired by Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, and Pino Arlacchi, Executive Director of the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention.

21. My Personal Representative briefed the group on his first mission to the region. The group also heard an oral report from Mr. Javad Zarif, Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, on the activities of the OIC delegation that had visited the region.

22. Turning to the main topic on the agenda, the "six plus two" group heard a statement by Mr. Arlacchi on the question of illicit drug production and trafficking in the context of Afghanistan as well as his agency's activities in the region. Members of the group agreed that the "six plus two" could make a useful contribution to drug-related problems and that the Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention should play a key role in facilitating its activities in this respect. They exchanged views on how best to address the drug-related issues in a coordinated manner with a view to eliminating illicit drug production in and trafficking from Afghanistan through a comprehensive and balanced regional action plan.

23. At the end of the meeting, members of the group agreed to continue working-level consultations with a view to convening a technical meeting supported by the Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention in early April in Vienna.

D. Military situation

24. Although fighting was at a low ebb during the reporting period, mainly because of severe winter weather and the occurrence of the holy month of Ramadan, it has never come to a complete halt. The flow of weapons and other war-making materials into Afghanistan has continued throughout the period, enabling both sides to prepare for spring offensives.

25. On 20 January, the Taliban launched a new offensive in Sar-e Pul in the northern province of Jowjzan, with air assaults and ground forces composed of

several thousand fighters, and captured the main district of Sang Charak. The area was recognized as one of the Uzbek-populated pockets that remained in an alliance with the United Front. The Uzbek fighters, as well as the local population, fled to the area of Balkhab.

26. In mid-February, the Taliban forces attempted to approach the main district of Dara-e Souf in the province of Samangan. Despite a few clashes on the ground between the two sides and a series of Taliban air raids, the United Front has so far been able to defend the area.

27. Following an increasing number of reports that both sides were preparing for new offensives at front lines to the north of Kabul, the Taliban forces, on 1 March, initiated fresh fighting in the province of Kunduz and the Shomali Plains. Simultaneously, the Taliban continued their attacks in the province of Samangan in the Dara-e Souf area where the United Front renewed their efforts to resist. The Taliban initially achieved significant progress in Kunduz and, on 2 March, captured Sher Khan Bandar, a port town on the Amu Darya river and the town of Imam Sahib. At the front lines to the north of Kabul, the Taliban advanced only to a very limited extent after some vigorous fighting. By 5 March the United Front had dispatched additional forces from the northern part of the province of Takhar and succeeded in recapturing ground lost in Kunduz. The United Front claims to have recaptured the towns of Imam Sahib and Sher Khan Bandar. Similarly, on 6 March the front lines to the north of Kabul were pushed back to the same location as in late February. In the area of Dara-e Souf, the most recent fighting led to the capture of some additional areas by the United Front.

III. HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A. Humanitarian situation

28. While the intensity of conflict over the period has reduced from the levels seen during the summer and fall of 1999, continued insecurity, as well as difficulties in obtaining permission to conduct assessments in areas recently affected by conflict, restrict humanitarian access to several parts of the country. Moreover, the impact of the Taliban offensive during the summer continues to be felt by large numbers of people who were displaced from their homes and who are gathered in Kabul, the Panjshir Valley and in various locations in the north and east of the country. Sporadic fighting in the central and northern regions has continued and is further complicating assistance efforts as well as compounding the plight of many civilians.

29. In early December, the United Nations negotiated a cross-front-line operation to provide for some 60,000 displaced persons in the Panjshir Valley. A joint commission composed of representatives from both the Taliban and the United Front was brought together by the United Nations to oversee the operation. United Nations demining teams initially cleared the road through the front-line area and subsequently escorted each of the five convoys that delivered the supplies. A total of 750 tons of food and several tons of essential non-food items provided by the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Committee of the Red

Cross (ICRC), among others, were transported from Kabul across the front line into the valley, where they were distributed to the most vulnerable. In addition to providing food and non-food assistance, the United Nations has provided temporary shelter, health services, sanitation and supplementary food with support from international and national non-governmental organizations. The relief operation is coordinated through parallel task forces of United Nations agencies, ICRC, and non-governmental organizations in both Islamabad and Kabul. Efforts to resume the cross-front-line operation in February ran into security and political difficulties. As at 6 March only one small convoy had been able to cross from Kabul to the Panjshir Valley.

30. Throughout December, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs coordinated a relief effort that brought urgently required winter relief items to 2,000 families and 150 tons of wheat provided by WFP to the neediest 1,000 families in Dara-e Souf in Samangan province. The United Nations mobilized a convoy of 1,500 donkeys contributed by all the villages along the route to move the aid across snow-covered passes to those in need.

31. Since the last report, there has been an increase in the number of displaced persons in Kabul. Approximately 16,000 displaced persons are now receiving assistance in the former Soviet Embassy compound. Regular food inputs from WFP have been matched by joint United Nations/non-governmental organizations non-food distributions. In addition, UNICEF, together with non-governmental organizations, has supported the provision of basic services (safe water, health care and education) and undertaken winterization measures for buildings in the compound. The bulk of the displaced persons remaining in Kabul continue to reside in the homes of relatives, who are themselves often poor and vulnerable. To address these needs, a programme funded by the European Community Humanitarian Office has been launched in the city to provide employment for some 4,000 families during the winter. In addition, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) is assisting more than 3,000 vulnerable women during the winter with cash for work in the production of relief items, which will benefit, in turn, another 29,000 vulnerable women. This has provided wages for needy women as well as improved the stock of emergency supplies.

32. The combination of a poor harvest, the tightening of border controls and a harsh winter with little precipitation has exacerbated food insecurity for the majority of Afghans. These conditions have contributed to the 45 per cent increase in the price of wheat across the country since October 1999. Food insecurity is particularly severe in Kabul, the central highlands, Badakhshan, Ghowr and Kandahar.

33. In Ghowr province, WFP Afghanistan is currently supporting an emergency food distribution targeting three districts (Chaghcharan, Tulle and Shahrak). By the end of March a total of 712 tons of wheat will have been distributed to 7,120 families. In Kandahar, 10 districts of the province, Kandahar City and parts of the provinces of Helmand and Zabol are being targeted for emergency food distribution. It is expected that WFP will distribute 7,164 tons of wheat to an estimated 200,000 people.

34. WFP has expanded its bakery project to the cities of Mazar-e Sharif and Jalalabad following surveys that employed 900 female surveyors. In Mazar-e Sharif, 80 bakeries have been selected to provide heavily subsidized bread to 85,000 food-insecure people for a seven-month period; 65 per cent of the recipients are women. In Jalalabad, it is estimated that the bakery will support approximately 100,000 vulnerable individuals. The bakery project in Kabul, which feeds 270,000 vulnerable people on a daily basis throughout the year, continues to be supported by WFP.

35. Health conditions for many Afghans continue to be extremely precarious. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports a significant increase in the incidence of acute respiratory infections, which account for 30 per cent of outpatients and 25 per cent of all deaths of children under five in Afghanistan. WHO is conducting training for male and female health care staff in various locations in the treatment and prevention of acute respiratory infections and, in collaboration with UNICEF and health-related non-governmental organizations, has provided materials and antibiotics in all regions. In addition, measles outbreaks have occurred in various areas, including Dara-e Souf (Samangan province) and Ghazni, Herat and Badakhshan provinces. WHO, in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health, UNICEF, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and non-governmental organizations has responded with investigation teams, medical supplies and, in some cases, vaccination of surrounding villages. In total, more than 650 people have died from measles.

36. Education in general, and in particular for girls, remains extremely problematic. Education is one of the priorities for discussion at the Joint Consultative Committee meetings between the Taliban authorities and the United Nations. Regrettably, little progress has been made at the policy level. However, non-formal home-based schools for girls and boys have emerged in many locations in Afghanistan and are being supported by a number of assistance agencies, including non-governmental organizations. In rural areas, the Taliban is often more responsive to the demands of local communities for formal education. In addition, support to the BBC/Reach project (radio education for Afghan children) and to BBC/AEP (radio awareness and education programme) continues through UNICEF and other agencies.

37. With the onset of winter, voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran slowed considerably. Since mid-December 1999, 942 families (5,652 persons) voluntarily repatriated from Pakistan, while 177 families (920 persons) returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the same period, 3,043 Afghans were deported from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Except for 78 families (448 persons), the deportees were single men, many of whom claimed to have left family members in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

38. In February, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Islamic Republic of Iran signed an agreement on a joint programme for the voluntary repatriation of Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Set to commence on 8 April 2000, the programme envisages the return to Afghanistan of 3,000 Afghan refugees per week. UNHCR is mobilizing the aid community in western and southern Afghanistan to improve preparedness for a rapid response to the expected influx.

39. The United Nations-coordinated mine action programme for Afghanistan continues to survey and clear mined and battlefield areas. The area cleared by the programme since its inception now totals 442 square kilometres. The total remaining mined area, including newly surveyed areas, is estimated at 716 square kilometres of which over 90 per cent is high-priority agricultural and grazing land. The programme currently has a shortfall of $17.9 million for its activities for the remainder of the year.

40. The annual poppy survey for the 1999/00 growing season was initiated in early 2000. Following the record estimated 43 per cent increase in poppy cultivation in 1999, there is good reason, based on the survey, to expect a decrease in 2000. Attention will also focus on areas where the authorities, with the encouragement of the Office of Drug Control and Crime Prevention, have proclaimed bans on poppy cultivation. The Office notes further progress in two inter-agency initiatives aimed at drug reduction in Afghanistan. Funding has now been received for the Greater Azro Initiative, which the Office will now take forward in partnership with UNHCR. Planning for an inter-agency integrated development programme for Helmand province is also advancing.

B. Human rights

41. War and winter have once again proven to be a deadly combination for Afghans. Sporadic fighting in recent months has taken a cruel toll on civilians already weakened by decades of warfare and grinding poverty that can, in part, be attributed to a long history of underdevelopment.

42. A significant characteristic of recent offensives is the deliberate targeting of civilians and the destruction of their assets and means of survival. Bombing in the Panjshir Valley in November 1999 and February 2000 has resulted in the deaths of innocent civilians. Fighting in Khoja Ghar in Takhar province and in the Dara-e Souf area of Samangan province towards the end of 1999 was accompanied by widespread burning and looting of homes and property. Fighting in December and January in the Sang Charak district of Jowjzan province has added to the growing number of people who are displaced in remote areas.

43. Even in the best of circumstances, winter is a difficult experience for many in Afghanistan. This current winter is no exception, especially for communities directly affected by warfare. The harsh conditions of winter, particularly in snowbound mountainous areas, will add to the suffering of displaced persons who have been made homeless. The difficulties faced by humanitarian agencies in gaining and maintaining access exacerbate socio-economic conditions that already constitute a threat to the lives of Afghans and their ability to enjoy other fundamental human rights. It is of equal concern that the right of displaced persons to return to their place of origin is not always respected.

44. Civilians, particularly those in war-affected communities, continue to be subjected to a wide range of human rights violations. There are continued reports of summary executions, arbitrary detention and forced labour of those in detention.

45. The indirect effect of fighting on the rights of Afghans is a continuing and major concern. Warfare in the Dara-e Souf area, for example, has severely affected the health and well-being of the population and their meagre health care facilities. A recent measles epidemic has added to an already high infant mortality rate. Elsewhere in Afghanistan, preventable childhood diseases contribute to the high number of children who die before their fifth birthday. Growing deprivation, including in particular among female-headed households and families with no routine source of income, is adding to the large number of impoverished people who are often reduced to begging to help them survive.

46. There has been some easing of restrictions in some parts of Afghanistan on the mobility of women and girls, particularly in terms of their access to the limited health care and educational facilities that are available. United Nations agencies are continuing to pursue these and related issues in Joint Consultative Committee discussions and at the local level.

IV. OBSERVATIONS

47. Although recent fighting has been confined to specific areas of the country, the apparent targeting of civilians and their assets has worsened the living conditions of the Afghan population. In the meantime, the impact of last summer's Taliban offensives has continued to have an adverse effect on the tens of thousands of internally displaced Afghans scattered throughout Afghanistan. Not only is the fighting likely to continue, despite repeated calls for a ceasefire by the Security Council and the General Assembly, but reports indicate that a major offensive is being prepared for the spring, suggesting that military supplies continue to be received from neighbouring countries. In view of these circumstances I have asked my Personal Representative to concentrate his efforts to persuade the parties to enter into a process of dialogue that may lead to a stable and verifiable ceasefire and, eventually, to an agreement on the establishment of a broadly based, multi-ethnic and fully representative government.

48. I commend the efforts of OIC under the chairmanship of President Khatami to bring the Afghan parties together in Jeddah. The stated commitment of the Governments that are members of the "six plus two" group to revitalize this mechanism is also encouraging.

49. I hope that the "six plus two" group's initiative on illicit drugs combined with its recent deliberations and the efforts of the Office of Drug Control and Crime Prevention will result in measurable progress on the problem of illicit cultivation, trafficking and consumption of drugs in Afghanistan and the region.

50. The peace initiatives of non-combatant Afghans such as the Rome and Cyprus processes are noteworthy. If coordinated and pursued in an altruistic spirit they may prove to be a useful complement to the overall efforts to bring about a negotiated settlement of the Afghan conflict.

51. It is encouraging to note the phased deployment of the UNSMA Civil Affairs Unit inside Afghanistan and also the increased cooperation extended by the two

main Afghan parties to the Office of the United Nations Coordinator for Afghanistan.

52. Before concluding, I wish to take this opportunity to thank the staff of the humanitarian agencies for their efforts in ensuring cross-front-line convoys in the Panjshir Valley and elsewhere with all the attendant risks of such operations, which require careful negotiation and coordination between the warring sides.